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ABSTRACT

Over 75 years ago, a British report on education commented on the confusion of aims in English language teaching, citing the quality of teaching, unsuitable textbooks, and lack of a coherent sense of purpose. Experience has shown that undergraduate linguistics has not come far since then. In the experimental, interdisciplinary program at the State University of New York, College at Old Westbury, students were found to be unprepared to cope with the curriculum because they lacked appropriate skills in hierarchical organization, generalization, and categorization, and did not know how to structure a problem to solve it. This suggests that the aims of the undergraduate linguistics course should be different from those of the graduate curriculum, with the greatest barrier to be overcome being the students' resistance to the challenges and responsibilities of thinking for themselves. In addition, the theoretical and technical aspects of the discipline, following the Bloomfieldian emphasis on methodology and analytical technique, may be unsuitable for undergraduate study. Linguists' bias toward the theoretical should not be allowed to control the curriculum to the exclusion of other valuable approaches to integrating other disciplines such as psychology and sociology, which may be more appropriate for the undergraduate level. (MSE)

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APPENDIX 4-M

# Teaching Linguistics in an Interdisciplinary Curriculum

by

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The views expressed are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the position of the LSA or the National Endowment for the Humanities.

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## PREFACE

The Linguistics in the Undergraduate Curriculum (LUC) project is an effort by the Linguistic Society of America (LSA) to study the state of undergraduate instruction in linguistics in the United States and Canada and to suggest directions for its future development. It was supported by a grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities during the period 1 January 1985-31 December 1987. The project was carried out under the direction of D. Terence Langendoen, Principal Investigator, and Secretary-Treasurer of the LSA. Mary Niebuhr, Executive Assistant at the LSA office in Washington, DC, was responsible for the day-to-day administration of the project with the assistance of Nicole VandenHeuvel and Dana McDaniel.

Project oversight was provided by a Steering Committee that was appointed by the LSA Executive Committee in 1985. Its members were: Judith Aissen (University of California, Santa Cruz), Paul Angelis (Southern Illinois University), Victoria Fromkin (University of California, Los Angeles), Frank Heny, Robert Jeffers (Rutgers University), D. Terence Langendoen (Graduate Center of the City University of New York), Manjari Ohala (San Jose State University), Ellen Prince (University of Pennsylvania), and Arnold Zwicky (The Ohio State University and Stanford University). The Steering Committee, in turn, received help from a Consultant Panel, whose members were: Ed Battistella (University of Alabama, Birmingham), Byron Bender (University of Hawaii, Manoa), Garland Bills (University of New Mexico), Daniel Brink (Arizona State University), Ronald Butters (Duke University), Charles Cairns (Queens College of CUNY), Jean Casagrande (University of Florida), Nancy Dorian (Bryn Mawr College), Sheila Embleton (York University), Francine Frank (State University of New York, Albany), Robert Freidin (Princeton University), Jean Berko-Gleason (Boston University), Wayne Harbert (Cornell University), Alice Harris (Vanderbilt University), Jeffrey Heath, Michael Henderson (University of Kansas), Larry Hutchinson (University of Minnesota, Minneapolis), Ray Jackendoff (Brandeis University), Robert Johnson (Gallaudet College), Braj Kachru (University of Illinois, Urbana), Charles Kreidler (Georgetown University), William Ladusaw (University of California, Santa Cruz), Ilse Lehiste (The Ohio State University), David Lightfoot (University of Maryland), Donna Jo Napoli (Swarthmore College), Ronald Macaulay (Pitzer College), Geoffrey Pullum (University of California, Santa Cruz), Victor Raskin (Purdue University), Sanford Schane (University of California, San Diego), Carlota Smith (University of Texas, Austin), Roger Shuy (Georgetown University), and Jessica Wirth (University of Wisconsin, Milwaukee).

INNOVATIONS IN LINGUISTICS EDUCATION 3.1 (1983), 65-71.*

Three quarters of a century ago, in 1906, a British Board of Education report commented on the confusion of aims in English Language teaching, citing "the quality of the teaching, the unsuitable textbooks, and the lack of any coherent sense of purpose."[1] Where are WE today? Modern linguistics is still predominantly a graduate discipline for very good reasons: it is highly technical and abstract in its theoretical component; it is highly specialised in its various branches; its claims are under continuous dispute and subject to continuous change; and its applicability to a generalised curriculum is not at all self-evident. But given an educational system that is characterised by the value it places on quantitative returns and practical applicability, the discipline of linguistics must diversify in order to survive as an integral, funded unit of a university. Hence undergraduate teaching. But uneasy is the compromise. Is there a justifiable rationale for the teaching of linguistics at the undergraduate level beyond the spurious need for self-survival? How can the admittedly technical and highly abstruse nature of the discipline be adapted to the needs of an undergraduate curriculum?

In this short presentation, I should like to begin an answer to these questions by sharing with you some of my experience in teaching linguistics in an interdisciplinary department at a four-year undergraduate college. The experimental aspects of the curriculum at the State University of New York, College at Old Westbury, its nontraditional student population, and the quite significant flexibility and freedom I have experienced in developing courses in linguistics over the past six years have caused me to rethink the role of linguistics within a general undergraduate curriculum.

Old Westbury started in the sixties as an experimental, nontraditional college. The four interdisciplinary programs still in existence are the only curricular remains of the initial experiment, but they are still significant. Not only do we not have a linguistics major, we don't have an English one. Students interested in language, literature, history, philosophy, or any other of the so-called 'humanities' fields must choose an interdisciplinary program (actually we have no departments at the College). All the other programs that are not interdisciplinary are divided among the social sciences, the natural sciences, and vocational programs (business and computer sciences, for example). For reasons too complex to go into here, linguistics became

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one of the fields included in my program, called Comparative History, Ideas, and Cultures, although how it should be represented there has been pretty much left up to me to determine.

The past six years, as a result, are littered with the corpses of courses I have brought into existence and then killed in the attempt to respond to the needs of the changing curriculum and the students. Some courses have undergone mutation. Only the introductory survey of the field has remained relatively inviolate: a reflection of its unique stability as the only linguistics course developed with content and textbooks suitable for undergraduates.[2] In the current catalogue, the following linguistics courses are listed in my program: Language and Culture (100 level); Introduction to Linguistics (200 level); Structure of English (300 level); and Development of the English Language and Reading Poetry (both at the 400 level). Since I am the sole linguist and teach literature courses as well, I find it difficult to meet student demand for further courses in socio- and psycholinguistics (not to mention my lack of specialisation in these areas).

Students sign up for all the familiar reasons: they hope to improve their writing skills; elementary education majors specialising in bilingualism have to take linguistics as a certification requirement;[3] business and computer science majors find the course descriptions potentially more useful to their needs than other liberal arts electives like literature or history; others shop simply for the instructor or the hour. Students in any given class will range from first semester freshmen (some with skills deficiencies) to last semester seniors and are generally balanced across age (from 17 to 70), sex, racial and class lines.[4]

In developing courses beyond the introductory survey level, therefore, I face the question familiar to all of us: Is linguistics as we know it in post-Bloomfieldian America, with its emphasis on theory and methodology, a suitable vehicle for the aims of linguistic instruction (whatever they may be) at the undergraduate level? The answer is both yes and no. First, yes.

With so much dissension currently in the field as to the nature or even worth of transformational-generative grammar, an instructor is faced with the choice of teaching the tradition (prescriptively) or taking on the gargantuan task of introducing students to the competing claims of different schools or even the changing perceptions within a school: a task which seems doomed to fail unless students are taught the theoretical bases of each claim. This problem is not new, although it may seem so to a discipline lik linguistics that has been associated historically with graduate rather than undergraduate studies. The natural sciences have been facing it, and failing to resolve it, for generations. Science courses for nonscience majors failed (and, for all

I know, are still failing) for one simple reason. In trying to teach scientific 'facts' as currently known, scientists had to teach scientific techniques or methodologies to enable students to understand these facts. We all know what happened in the sixties: defeated by the attempt to make nonscience students absorb the technical information deemed necessary to understand the simplest of scientific concepts, courses became flaky and superfluous. One famous example I remember was a course called Math in the Modern World, taught as THE science requirement for nonscience majors at the University of Massachusetts in the late sixties. Linguistics would do well to learn from this lesson, and so it is the scientific aspect of the discipline that I would like to focus on primarily.

In Structure of English, which I have taught for several years, I take a transformational-generative approach and have used both Akmajian and Heny, and Keyser and Postal as texts.[5] Let me say at the outset that I have not yet managed to get any class beyond the passive voice. I do not now see this necessarily as failure. Akmajian and Heny I found more suited to the advanced student who wants to work at his/her own pace in independent study. Keyser and Postal, though designed for the undergraduate, is hopeless from the students' point of view, being full of not clearly defined jargon of the trade; assuming knowledge of traditional grammar that very few if any students have; made unnecessarily complex by the addition of practically everything they know about the topic thrown into the footnotes. It is nevertheless excellent in its methodological approach. Since it had proved such a stumbling block for students in the past, last year I decided to experiment by throwing out the textbook altogether. The fear that promptly reduced me to quivering idiocy before the semester even began made me realise how much we use texts as crutches rather than aids. I subsequently learnt the students did too. I stole freely from texts and relied on handouts for every class. Instead of assigning readings, I gave out exercises due the next class period, with the philosophy that linguistics is best learnt by doing. The exercises were designed so that students could answer them based on knowledge to date, but they always introduced new problems that the students would have to work out for themselves. Readings WERE put on reserve in the library, but only the most advanced students made use of them.

This is what I learnt. I learnt what students don't know. Brought up to believe in our authority as truth-disseminating teachers, they don't know that the definition of a problem is that we DON'T have the answer. They don't know what the first steps in problem-solving are, how to begin to first recognise and then structure a problem, and are confused and frightened when faced with the challenge of doing so. They can't draw trees because they don't understand the principles underlying the hierarchical organisation and lack the associated skills of generalisation and categorisation. They believe nouns, verbs,

prepositions, etc. are arbitrary preordained labels to be memorised by rote along with the vocabulary list. (If you ask them who did the preordaining, they will answer "God" or "the Dictionary," depending on their belief systems.) They don't understand Heraclitus' maxim that you can't step into the same river twice, that language is not static but continually changing. In short, they enter the classroom with all the prejudices and fallacies we despair over when we encounter self-nominated 'experts' on language in the columns of our daily newspapers.

And so I found my focus and approach changing. Instead of worrying about how much linguistics they needed to understand the structure of their language, I found that what was important to the students was their gradual acquisition of problem-solving skills, the ability to think things out for themselves. What was valuable to me was of no use to them unless they could internalise the process of thinking linguistically.[6] In this sense, linguistics is a science and is singularly adapted to the teaching of a scientific approach at the undergraduate level, not least because the data is already in some sense known to the students. And so it doesn't matter if we don't progress beyond passive. The most important lessons I learnt from this experiment were that the aims of our undergraduate courses should be quite different from those of our graduate programs, and that the most difficult barrier we have to overcome is the students' overwhelmingly stubborn resistance to the challenges and responsibilities of thinking for themselves. They'd much rather we, or our textbooks, did it for them.

With respect to our interdisciplinary approach, I have also discovered that students are in fact eager for more courses that will deal with the subjects they encounter in their developmental psych courses, in urban sociology, in political science, and so on. Which brings me to the other side of the question. Except for the scientific aspects of linguistics I have outlined, I don't think that the theoretical and technical aspects of the discipline as they have been practised in America in this century, following the Bloomfieldian emphasis on methodology and analytical technique, are suitable for undergraduate study. The fears expressed of watering down or distorting the field come, I think, from our own bias toward the theoretical. The other strain of linguistic study, epitomised for example by the generalist, cross-disciplinary interest of Sapir, in Jespersen's *Mankind, Nation and Individual from a Linguistic Point of View*, or Jakobson's monumental studies, needs to be developed and exploited for the more practical needs of our undergraduate students. Linguistic knowledge, after all, is coming increasingly to the forefront of work in many areas and disciplines in the twentieth century. Psychologists are exploring patterns of language behaviour in patients with specific mental disorders, neurosurgeons are making new discoveries every day

about the language functions of the brain, computer scientists are delimiting the boundaries between natural anc artificial languages. The list could go on and on. Unless we adapt our teaching methods and materials to prepare the students who will very likely end up in such fields, we will be bypassed by the very core of what makes linguistics alive today. Applications of linguistic knowledge in tne teaching of English, of composition, of foreign languages, of literature, need to be supplemented with work being done in sociolinguistics and psycholinguistics to produce a range of courses suitable and valuable for the undergraduate curriculum. Perhaps then I won't be the sole linguist in my program.

Linguistics, unlike any other discipline in existence today, is in the unique situation of being claimed as a member of each of the traditional three branches of knowledge: the humanities, the social and the natural sciences. It has the potential of becoming central to the core of a general studies curriculum. It needs only the linguists to do it.

What I have said in this presentation is not particularly new--it has been said before. But it would indeed be a shame if what was said in 1906 and is being said again here today is said in another 75 years because we were not committed to act. The generalist demands made upon us by the inherently interdisciplinary nature of the undergraduate curriculum mean that we cannot do it alone. The major frustration I feel at Old Westbury is the lack of suitable materials in areas I do not have the specialisation, time, or resources to develop. I am surely not alone. It seems to me, therefore, highly appropriate that an organisation like NYSCOL could provide a valuable service to the teaching of linguistics at the undergraduate level by sponsoring an editorial committee for a general series of readings for specific courses beyond the introductory survey.[7] If each of us were prepared to devote a little of our time within our own specialisations, we could perhaps achieve together what is impossible alone.

Finally, we need to remember what we are about: what our 'coherent sense of purpose' is in developing an undergraduate linguistics curriculum. After four years in a philosophy department in an English University where we as undergraduates were literally outnumbered by our instructors two to one, the chair of our department, the philosophy professor, met with us for the last time before graduation. To our collective astonishment, nurtured as we had been on the mysteries of Greek philosophy, on Spinoza, Berkeley, Kant, and so on, she said: "The one thing I want to be sure about is that as graduates of this university you do not go out as naive realists." How much more we had progressed beyond that point, we thought! But, over the years, I have realised just how wise she was. It didn't matter in the end which philosophy we embraced, whether existential or Marxist, rational or

empirical: in a world dominated by naive realists, we were to be the checks and balances, living proof that humans are capable of more than an unthinking acceptance of the world around us. And so, as I think of our role as teachers of linguistics, and remembering my philosophy professor, I suggest that in a world filled with nonsense about language, it is not an ignoble goal to produce graduates, wherever they go and whatever career they choose, who can separate fact from fantasy and who recognise the central and integral role of language in their lives.

## REFERENCES

[1]See Randolph Quirk and H.A. Smith's "Introduction" to their edited volume, *The Teaching of English*, London: Oxford University Press, 1959, pp. 1-2.

[2]A general, undergraduate course may be said to have reached maturity when a range of textbooks is available to choose from and their content pretty much standard. This is true only for the introductory survey course in linguistics, an indication that linguistics offerings in general at the undergraduate level are still relatively new.

[3]I find it somewhat ironic that only the bilingual and not the general elementary education majors have to take a linguistics course under New York State Certification requirements. Furthermore, the bilingual education majors are the ONLY group of students at Old Westbury who have such a requirement.

"Since none of the courses offered under linguistics carry a linguistics prerequisite, each course must be designed with the expectation that most students will have had no prior course in linguistics. Class size for each course is 30 (a result of classroom space not pedagogical thinking). Lower division courses tend to fill each semester; despite the fewer numbers of students taking linguistics courses at the upper division level, the demand for at least one 400-level course each year is steady. The fact that Old Westbury attracts students of every age and from very varied backgrounds, part-time and full-time for both day and evening classes means that Old Westbury faculty experience the full range of both traditional and nontraditional students in all their courses.

[5]Adrian Akmajian and Frank Heny, *An Introduction to the Principles of Tranformational Syntax*, Cambridge: M.I.T.Press, 1975; Samuel J. Keyser and Paul N. Postal, *Beginning English Grammar*, New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1976. Akmajian and Heny, like most transformational-generative texts, was designed for graduate study, but is clearly enough written and presented that the more advanced

undergraduate student can work through it easily. The Keyser-Postal text is the only one I am aware of in syntax designed specifically for undergraduates.

[6]Lest readers run away with the idea that Old Westbury students are less competent than their colleagues elsewhere, let me hasten to point out that my findings are rather an indictment of the American education system than of the students' individual capabilities and potentialities. The preparation and ability of students in linguistics classes at Old Westbury tend to vary as much as they themselves do. One encouraging result of the experiment was that the level of achievement on the final examination was much higher for more students than in previous years.

[7]That previous attempts at producing a general series of readings has not worked well in American publishing should not deter such an attempt. If teachers of linguistics at the undergraduate level are beginning, like me, to find the need for more courses beyond the introductory survey, then the demand exists for suitable texts. Furthermore, the material currently available in linguistics studies on certain general topics needs to be recast in a clearer framework for the undergraduate reader. The British publications that exist, such as the Methuen New Accents series, Andre Deutsch's The Language Library, or Longman's The English Language Series are superior in this respect and have no real American counterpart. Adrian Akmajian's suggestion of a series of national conferences to develop the teaching of linguistics at the undergraduate level would be a useful preparatory step.